

**Virginia Cave Board
Saturday, March 15, 2008
DCR Natural Heritage Program Conference Room, Richmond, Virginia**

MINUTES

Virginia Cave Board Members Present

Mr. Tom Lera, Chairman
Mr. Andrew Harrison
Dr. John R. Holsinger
Ms. Judy Molnar
Mr. David Socky

Virginia Cave Board Members Not Present

Dr. David C. Culver
Mr. Jesse Richardson
Ms. Babs Melton
Ms. Barbara L. Moss
Ms. Claire Ward
Virginia Department of Historical Resources representative

DCR Staff Present

Mr. Joey Fagan
Mr. Chris Hobson
Mr. Larry Smith
Mr. Tom Smith
Mr. Wil Orndorff

Others Present

Ms. Meredith Hall Johnson
Ms. Mary Sue Socky

Call to Order

Mr. Tom Lera called the meeting to order at 1:05 p.m. and declared a quorum was not present.

Introduction and Announcements

Mr. Lera welcomed members, staff, and guests.

Minutes from November 3, 2007

Mr. Lera recognized the consensus of the Board that the minutes of the November 3, 2007 meeting of the Virginia Cave Board as corrected are accurate.

Treasury Report

Mr. Larry Smith presented the treasury report; he noted that expenses associated with the recent publication of the Virginia Cave Owners Newsletter have expended all funds from the DCR Cave Board account.

Plans were discussed regarding ongoing efforts to seek grants from several organizations including the Cave Conservancy of the Virginias, the National Speleological Society (NSS), the Richmond Area Speleological Society, and the Virginia Region of the NSS to fund the continuing semiannual publication of the Virginia Cave Owners Newsletter as well as other special projects of the Cave Board including the production and placement of signs in selected significant caves in Virginia (see item below).

Old Business

Education and Outreach Committee

Virginia Cave Week 2008 will be observed during the week of April 20 through 26, 2008 in conjunction with Earth Day (April 22). Ms. Judy Molnar reported that web based resources for teachers as well as the public are being prepared for posting on the Virginia Cave Board website for Virginia Cave Week. Ms. Barbara Moss has developed a list of links to websites containing extensive information about caves and karst. Dr. John Holsinger suggested a collection of cave biology images be included on the Cave Week website. Mr. Socky will establish a Cave Week website for the Cave Board; this will add to the existing resources that will continue to be available on the DCR hosted Cave Board website.

Ms. Meredith Hall Johnson asked about plans to publicize Virginia Cave Week. Timely announcement to the members of caving organizations, to show caves, and to the teaching community is important in order to derive the greatest benefit from the observance of Cave Week. It is anticipated that information will be circulated through several e-mail lists. Ms. Johnson noted that several NSS Grottos would be willing to assist with education and outreach activities in support of Cave Week.

Joint Technical Committee

Mr. Andrew Harrison reported that there has been no movement regarding new regulations concerning karst stormwater issues.

Mr. Harrison reported that letters are being drafted to send to the regional offices of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) requesting information on their program concerning karst. The Underground Storage Tank Program has regulations that deal with specific issues that could have karst impacts. Much of DEQ's treatment of karst issues, however, is currently dealt with under their Voluntary Program.

Virginia DCR Natural Heritage Karst Program

Mr. Wil Orndorff reported that the DCR Karst Program has completed draft conservation sites for all designated significant caves and other caves with documented natural heritage resources in Virginia, and the data is undergoing QA/QC and being integrated into the Virginia Natural Heritage data system. It is anticipated that a complete report documenting significance criteria for all Virginia Significant Caves will be presented at the next Cave Board Meeting in June 2008.

The DCR Natural Heritage Karst Program has moved into a new temporary office space in Christiansburg, Virginia. In the coming year it is anticipated that the Karst Program will move to a permanent space within the same office building.

Carol Zokaite of the Karst Program has recently returned to work after taking several weeks off to recover from hip surgery.

Mr. Orndorff reported on funding challenges being faced by the Karst Program. Significant shortfalls are anticipated as federal grant funding through Section 319 of the Clean Water Act is reduced in the coming year, office space costs have tripled, and privatization has increased cost of IT services. It is hoped that other sources of funding can be identified and developed to enable the work of the Karst Program to continue.

Mr. Tom Smith reported that the DCR Division of Recreation Planning has recently released the Virginia Outdoors Plan.

Underground Storage Tank Guidelines for Karst

Mr. Harrison noted that the letters being sent to the DEQ regional offices would be requesting details about how the Underground Storage Tank Program is addressing karst issues. It is anticipated that more information will be available by the June Cave Board meeting.

Gilley Cave

The owner of Gilley Cave is seeking to protect the cave by donating it to a conservation organization. Representatives from the DCR Karst Program, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the West Virginia Cave Conservancy visited Gilley Cave in November 2007 to evaluate the condition of the cave. Though the cave receives a lot of traffic, the cave is generally in good condition. It was recommended that TNC not accept donation of the cave in favor allowing a cave conservancy to own the cave in order to keep the cave open

to recreational caving (realizing that closing the cave would likely increase visitor traffic to other caves in the area that might be more environmentally sensitive than Gilley Cave). The Appalachian Cave Conservancy (ACC) has reportedly agreed to accept the donation of the cave. According to the wishes of the current landowner, ACC will own, gate, and manage the cave.

Rocky Hollow Cave

The planned clean-up and mitigation work in Rocky Hollow Cave will likely occur on Friday, June 6, 2008. It is expected the individual with charges being held under advisement for violation of the Virginia Cave Protection Act will actively participate in the clean-up to help mitigate damages caused by his alleged vandalism of the cave.

Cave Conservation Partners

Significant Caves at Risk

Mr. Orndorff noted that the upcoming written report on conservation sites for the significant caves in Virginia would be a valuable resource in identifying significant caves at risk. Mr. Charles Maus had raised the issue at the Cave Board hosted Cave Conservation Partners meeting on September 22, 2007 at Natural Tunnel State Park. Mr. Maus has indicated he will coordinate work of an ad hoc committee established at the September 22, 2007 meeting to develop a priority protection list for significant caves. The several members of the Board suggested a “top ten” list or something similar be developed to guide protection efforts.

Virginia Karst Trail

Mr. Joey Fagan reported that the newly released Virginia Outdoors Plan recommends creation of a Virginia Karst Trail in each of the planning districts located in the karst regions of Virginia’s Valley and Ridge as well as in the karst of Virginia’s Eastern Shore. Mr. Fagan noted work of Andy Reeder of the Virginia Region (VAR) of the National Speleological Society in developing and promoting the concept of a Virginia Karst Trail. The Board has expressed an interest in working with organizational partners and interested individuals to develop this karst educational thematic trail. Dave Socky will attend the joint SERA/VAR Spring meeting where he will talk with Mr. Reeder and others in an effort to start to build the organizational synergy and partnerships to accommodate planning, funding, design, and eventual development of a Virginia Karst Trail.

Other Old Business

Grand Caverns

Ms. Judy Molnar reported on recent discussions with Mr. Andy Wells of the Upper Valley Regional Parks Authority regarding an increase in requests for wild caving trips

into Fountain Cave on the Grand Caverns Property by youth groups. Grand Caverns is seeking to balance the desire to provide educational opportunities for young people with the need to limit visitation to Fountain Cave in order to protect the delicate cave resources from adverse impacts due to overuse. Ms. Mary Sue Socky, Ms. Johnson, Mr. Harrison, and Mr. Fagan all related their own experiences about leading caving trips for youth groups.

Ms. Molnar described the confusion that resulted when a news story last year in a local newspaper reported incomplete details about a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grant. Ms. Molnar related that the Upper Valley Regional Parks Authority (UVRPA) is anxiously awaiting some movement by the Commonwealth regarding plans for Grand Caverns to eventually become a state park. The UVRPA is in the unfortunate position of having to make medium and long-range management decisions for the Grand Caverns facilities while having little certainty regarding the future plans for property.

Second Appalachian Karst Symposium

Mr. Lera announced that the Second Appalachian Karst Symposium would be held May 7 – 10, 2008 at East Tennessee State University at Johnson City, Tennessee. Mr. Orndorff announced that thirty-five papers from a variety of disciplines have been accepted for the conference; registration is open to scientists, cavers, or anyone else with an interest in Appalachian Karst. See: <http://www.etsu.edu/physics/appkarst/> for more information.

New Business

White Nose Syndrome (WNS)

The Virginia Cave Board made the following statement on White Nose in bat populations:

- The Virginia Cave Board supports the scientific studies being undertaken to determine the cause of "white nose" in bat populations.
- The Cave Board endorses the on-going policy of seasonal closure of caves where large numbers and/or legally protected species of bats are hibernating or have summer maternity or bachelor colonies, as identified by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.
- The Virginia Cave Board encourages cavers to follow gear-disinfecting protocols between cave trips.
- The Cave Board asks that cavers, in the normal course of caving, report any bat mortality, anomalous behavior, unusual appearance, or high bat concentrations to Rick Reynolds at the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (Rick.Reynolds@dgif.virginia.gov, 540-248-9386).

Cave Board Vacancies

Mr. Lera announced that Ms. Claire Ward intends to resign from the Cave Board. This leaves two current vacancies on the Virginia Cave Board.

Mr. Smith reported that there had been no word yet from the governor's office regarding new appointees to the Virginia Cave Board.

Other New Business

Virginia Cave Owners Newsletter

Mr. Lera requested that an electronic version of the Virginia Cave Owners Newsletter be posted on the Cave Board Website.

The most recent issue of the Cave Owners Newsletter was published in February 2008. About 780 copies were distributed by mail. Mr. Orndorff pointed out that most of the owners of Virginia's approximately 4300 caves are not currently on the mailing list to receive the publication. Mr. David Socky will coordinate with the Virginia Speleological Survey (VSS) to update and expand the mailing list of landowners.

Signs for Significant Caves

Mr. Lera outlined a proposal to produce signs that would state that all caves in Virginia are protected by law. Of Virginia's approximately 370 significant caves, only about 100 of these caves currently have signs. It is estimated it would cost approximately \$1600 to have 500 signs made. A consensus existed to pursue a grant to pay for the cost of producing the signs and to work with the VSS and the VAR to place the signs inside selected Virginia caves.

Status of the Karst Program Budget

Mr. Tom Smith further discussed Karst Program budget reductions and the current financial challenges to Karst Program operations. Mr. Smith encouraged the Virginia Cave Board work on efforts that would create additional support for the DCR Natural Heritage Karst Program. Mr. Lera expressed the Board's intention to actively work to help secure general funding support for the Karst Program.

Dates for Future Cave Board Activities

- Meeting: June 14, 2008 at Crystal Caverns at Strasburg, Virginia
- Meeting: October 4, 2008 at Grand Caverns at Grottoes, Virginia.

Thanks to the DCR Natural Heritage Program for Hosting Meeting

Mr. Lera expressed thanks on behalf of the Cave Board to Tom Smith and the DCR Natural Heritage Program for hosting the meeting.

Adjournment

Mr. Lera adjourned the meeting at 3:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas Lera
Board Chairman

Joseph H. Fagan
Secretary